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SUBJECT: SADR CITY SHI'A IMAMS NOT SANGUINE ON
RECONCILIATION, ELECTIONS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1744
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Classified By: Political Counselor Yuri Kim for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

I1. (C) SUMMARY: Shi'a imams and community activists told Emboffs that: Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation would be impossible in the near- to mid-term; Iraqis would continue to vote on sectarian lines in upcoming elections; no existing political party enjoys genuine credibility; a major effort on voter education is needed to encourage people to vote for individuals based on platforms (vice sectarian affiliation); and the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is overly politicized and incapable of staging credible elections. Attacks in late July/early August (our meeting pre-dated the August 19 bombings in Baghdad) were, in their view, the opening round of an expected surge in election-related political violence. A sub-text throughout the meeting was a fear that recent gains in security and political comity remain fragile. END SUMMARY.

I2. (C) Baghdad ePRT Northeast team members, together with Embassy Baghdad's CAO and Poloffs, met with a group of Shi'a imams and community activists on August 12 at ePRT Northeast Baghdad to discuss their activities and assess the mood in their respective communities in the run-up to national elections.

IRAQ IS INHERENTLY SECTARIAN

I3. (C) The imams and community leaders agreed that virtually all extant Iraqi political parties are &fundamentally sectarian⁸ in nature. Reflecting the apparent consensus of the group, Ali Jawad al-Musaferi, a self-described Communist and Director of the Isin Center for Landmine Awareness, said it would be impossible to reconcile Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a in the near- to mid-term. The long history of enmity and bloodshed between the two, together with what is considered to &make a man⁸ in the Arab world (an image influenced by &watching six hours of Saddam Hussein on TV every day for 35 years⁸), are such that reconciliation will be a long-term project. Several imams questioned whether it was possible at all.

I4. (C) While cross-sectarian and nationalist parties and groupings are currently in vogue, several of the sheikhs agreed that most Iraqis are not politically sophisticated and would therefore largely vote along sectarian lines in the upcoming national election. The disproportionate influence of sectarian identity helps explain why candidates are able to run for election in Iraq without a substantive platform, they said. After 35 years of brutalization under Saddam, it was understandable that most Iraqis believed that &he who holds the sword rules,⁸ and that he who carried that sword should be a strong leader.

PARTIES "USELESS", BRIBERY NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

I5. (C) The imams and community leaders unanimously expressed distaste for politicians and political parties, calling them

a &blight8 on Iraq and &a self-interested and incompetent class that is to be endured.⁸ They blamed politicians for the country,s failure to move forward since the 2005 national elections and asserted that the political parties -- not al-Qaeda -- were the &real threat⁸ to Iraq,s stability. Sheikh Shiayt al-Faraji, a Sadr City imam affiliated with the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr (of the Sadrist Trend), stated that all parties focused only on trumping each other politically, usually at the expense of programs and cooperation (ref A). Despite claims by the al-Maliki government that it had improved security conditions, the situation was not good. The culpability of the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police in kidnapping individuals for ransom underscored how precarious things really were. Recent attacks against mosques, political party headquarters, and minority groups in the north appeared to have been intended to destabilize al-Maliki and provoke Shi,a retaliation. (Note: Our meeting pre-dated the August 19 bombings of key government targets in Baghdad. End note.)

¶6. (C) Pervasive corruption was also an acute problem, our interlocutors said. The difference between Saddam-era corruption and the current situation was that under Saddam, if you bribed the right people (i.e., Ba,ath Party officials), you stood a good chance of getting the service you needed. Today, it was unclear who had the authority to provide needed services) bribes were still demanded, but there was little certainty that anything would come of paying them.

ELECTIONS

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¶7. (C) The imams asserted that disorganization with respect to registering voters and orchestrating polling for the upcoming election is a key problem. Iraqis generally agree that there were widespread irregularities during the 2005 national elections and even during the recent provincial elections, they said. Several of the imams claimed to have witnessed tampering with ballots and ballot boxes. Proper administration of the upcoming elections would be critical since most Iraqis are pre-disposed to believe there would be fraud. General ignorance among Iraqis about the elections and the political process would further hamper the administration of credible elections. A better voter education effort, to include the use of mass media and instruction in basic civics, would encourage people to vote for individuals with a good platform instead of those with the &correct8 sectarian affiliation. They agreed that imams must deliver the same message at the mosques to reinforce and lend credibility.

¶8. (C) Most of the participants agreed that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), whose commissioners are chosen by the Council of Representatives (COR), was overly politicized. (Note: IHEC currently comprises four Shi,a, two Kurds, a Turkoman and a Sunni; the chair is a Kurd. End note.) Sheikh Mustafa al-Sudani (an imam at the al-Rahman mosque and an Iraqi Police administrative official) observed that each IHEC commissioner was affiliated with a political party and called for the appointment of more neutral commissioners. Claiming to represent the views of most Iraqis, they questioned IHEC's ability to stage credible elections.

RECENT ATTACKS FORETELL A MEAN ELECTION SEASON

¶9. (C) Poloffs asked about community reaction to bombings that had targeted the Shi,a community since late July and about the possible motivation for them. An imam at a Sadr City mosque attributed the attacks to al-Qaeda and &certain8 political actors, arguing that they were committed to provoke &ordinary Iraqis.⁸ He commented that the strategy would fail because \$arianism is over,⁸ but

said Iraqis nonetheless widely anticipate an increase in politically-motivated violence in the run-up to the election (ref B). (Comment: The imams agreed earlier in the discussion that Iraqi politics were essentially sectarian in nature. End comment.)

¶110. (C) COMMENT: We have heard many of the same things from other contacts, including Sunnis. Disdain for extant political parties, deep skepticism about IHEC's ability to fairly administer the election, a fear that Iraqi politics remain fundamentally sectarian, and a belief that Iraqis need to learn a new political culture are recurring themes in our conversations with contacts from across the political spectrum. The sub-text for those is an abiding fear that recent gains in security and political comity remain fragile, a concern the August 19 attacks have thrown into stark relief. END COMMENT.

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